

State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY



COMMISSION ON CHILDREN

CONNECTICUT COMMISSION ON CHILDREN
Minutes of Meeting

**Parents as Partners in Public Policy: Stronger Families,
Stronger Communities**
Legislative Office Building, Room 2C
Hartford, Connecticut

Tuesday, June 14, 2005
9:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

Voting members present: Judith Busch, James Cordier, Dr. Alex Geertsma, Mary Grace Reed and John Yrchik.

Ex officio members (or designees) present: Department of Correction (Mary Johnson), Department of Education (Mary Carson, Charlene Russell-Tucker), Department of Public Health (Martha Okafor) and Department of Social Services (Sylvia Gafford-Alexander).

Members absent: Maryann Campbell, Joseph Clary, Office of Policy and Management (Anne Foley), Mary Fox, Representative Demetrios Giannaros, Senator Mary Ann Handley, Alison Hilding, Carl Hooper, Department of Children and Families (Debra Korta), Representative Michael Lawlor, Chief Court Administrator (Judge Michael Mack), Senator Christopher Murphy, Department of Mental Retardation (Commissioner Peter O'Meara), Attorney General (Susan Pearlman), Josh Piteo and Laura Lee Simon.

Commission staff present: Elaine Zimmerman, Thomas Brooks, Elizabeth Brown, Patricia Estill, Dawn Homer-Bouthiette, Amanda Hunyadi, Rachel Levy and Edie Luciano.

Handouts: Agenda; Biography of Anne T. Henderson, CT State Board of Education Revised Position Statement on School-Family-Community Partnerships, Parent Trust Fund Update Volume 2, April 2005, Engaging Families to Improve Achievement: Advice from the Research, Session, Engaging Families to Improve Achievement: Suggestions for Effective School Leaders, Parent Leadership Training Institute Curriculum, The Child Care Partnership Project, CT Family Learning Initiative: Research Brief November 2004, Meriden Children First Initiative – 2005

Parent's Guide to the Meriden School Budget, Family Learning: Put your child on The Road to Success and People Empowering People Brochure.

Meeting Convened

Chair Judith Busch called the meeting to order at 9:50 a.m. She said that parents are their children's first and most important resource and that parenting is a lifelong activity.

Executive Director Elaine Zimmerman said that parents are very important partners in public policy. She highlighted the Parent Trust Act which was funded this year, and she thanked Rep. Walter Pawelkiewicz for his leadership on this issue. Rep. Pawelkiewicz introduced the keynote speaker, Anne Henderson, an education policy consultant at New York University.

Parents as Partners in Public Policy

Ms. Henderson commended Connecticut for investing in parents through the Parent Trust Fund, the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI), and Parents SEE. She gave an overview of parent involvement research. Some of the research findings include the following:

- If parents are involved, children do better in school, behave better, and are more likely to graduate from high school.
- Parents and community involvement that is designed to improve student learning has a greater effect on achievement.
- Programs that engage families in supporting children's learning lead to improved student achievement.
- The more families can be advocates for children and support their progress, the better their children do, and the longer they stay, in school.
- Families of all backgrounds are involved in supporting their children at home.
- Kindergarten readiness is one of the best predictors of success in school.
- Effective ways to engage families include focusing on building personal relationships, recognizing and removing barriers, embracing partnership and sharing power, and dealing with class and cultural differences.
- Organized initiatives to build parent and community leadership and improve failing schools are growing in urban areas.

Ms. Henderson discussed strategies to implement parent involvement in schools. She offered the following recommendations:

- Make sure that all efforts to engage families, at school or in the community, have a link to improving student learning.

- Develop trusting, personal relationships. She criticized school open houses where parents are herded through the building without being provided a meaningful opportunity for interaction.
- Recognize, respect and address differences of culture, language and class.
- Support families to be advocates – to guide children’s progress from preschool to postsecondary education.
- Build families’ social and political connections.

Ms. Busch asked when and how school systems moved away from valuing parent involvement. Ms. Henderson cited the increase in the size of school districts and schools, increased diversity, and the professionalization of teaching and administration, and the growing attitude that experts are in charge and that parents should leave their children’s education to those professionals.

A father in the audience complained about the lack of father involvement. He outlined the challenges he faces as a noncustodial parent in terms of being involved in his children’s lives. Ms. Henderson said that father involvement is just as important as mother involvement, and that greater outreach to fathers by schools is very important.

Ms. Zimmerman led a panel discussion on parent involvement with Commission members, nonprofit leaders and parent leaders. Darnell Moss, a parent leader from Meriden, said that noncustodial fathers need to fight for shared custody of their children. He praised PLTI for helping him learn about the educational and political systems and how to navigate them.

Domenique Thornton, Mayor of Middletown, said that parents have the greatest influence on their children. She said that great schools depend on parent involvement. Martha Okafor of the Connecticut Department of Public Health said that parent involvement is a key part of a new Connecticut initiative, Early Childhood Partners. She said that children are born “wired” in their brains with the ability to learn; we need to ensure that the child’s environment supports the child’s learning from the beginning.

David Radcliffe of Meriden Children First said that parent involvement is critical to promote the success of children. He outlined local successes of parents in Meriden to direct new public monies to the education system. Patti Keckeisen of Danbury Children First said that the Danbury PLTI program tracks parent involvement by recording how many graduates are appointed to boards and commissions or are elected to public office.

Peggy Deschenes of Governor Rell’s office said that Gov. Rell recognizes the impact of parent involvement on children’s achievement and that she is committed to enhance educational opportunities for children, especially in preschool education.

Tauna Saunders of Connecticut Parent Power said that parents can have an impact on public policy through an organization such as hers that unites parents to advocate for such issues as affordable and quality health care. Marne Usher of the Connecticut Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) said that it is important to involve not only parents but also the whole community in

schools. She said that one knows that a PTA is working when there is open communication in the schools, parents are welcome in the schools, and superintendents take phone calls from parents and respond to them.

Maria Mojica of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund said that parent engagement is an important part of strengthening communities. She said that the Memorial Fund has supported parent involvement through the Children First initiatives. She said that all families can contribute, but that we need to identify and address the barriers that families face.

Eddie Cajigas of Career Resources in Bridgeport said that 24 million children live without their father. He said that fathers are very important to their children's lives. He said that, when fathers are involved, children do better in school and are more likely to avoid drug abuse and incarceration. Doug Edwards of Real Dads Forever said that drawing parents to a forum or open house involves attention to the quality of food provided, convenient times and other details. When fathers are involved with their children's education, they are more likely to understand that they have to be intentional in shaping the lives of their children. Ms. Busch said that noncustodial fathers can obtain report cards and other school records for their children, even if they have to fill out special forms or make repeated requests.

Mona Tremblay of the Connecticut Family Support Network said that parents of children with disabilities can advocate for programs in the schools by distributing literature and reports and speaking regularly with school officials, and that they empower other parents by example. She said that parents have an obligation to encourage other parents and help them get training in education law and other issues that will help them advocate for their children with disabilities.

Donna Marino of the Middletown Public Schools said that parent involvement makes a difference in her school system. She said that some school officials previously saw parents primarily as a volunteer resource, but that it is also important to assist parents in being effective parents in supporting their children's education, and to help parents participate in decision-making in schools. Stephanie Alderman, a parent leader from Middlesex PLTI, said that having the mayor come to her PLTI class showed her that local leaders wanted parents' input.

Cheryl Czuba of the University of Connecticut said that the People Empowering People (PEP) program is an entry-level program that builds on people's strengths. Through PEP, many parents make a contribution to their communities and go on to participate in PLTI or another parent engagement effort.

Andrew Lachman of the Center for School Change said that the goal of parent involvement is to improve children's learning. He gave an overview of Parents SEE, which focuses on education, change and leadership. Parents develop understanding, practice skills and master tools that make them effective partners in educational improvement. Betsy Morgan of the Middlesex Coalition for Children said that when PLTI parents spoke at the State Capitol in favor of the Parent Trust Act, the legislators applauded.

Charlene Russell-Tucker of the Connecticut Department of Education (SDE) said that the State Board of Education took a position showing its commitment to parent involvement. Judy Carson of SDE said that many parents say they want more information from schools even though

schools are providing information all the time, indicating that there is a communication gap between schools and parents. SDE has focused on family literacy and social marketing research to determine whether the messages given are appropriate. In this research, SDE learned that parents listen to those close to their child, including teachers, child care professionals, librarians and faith leaders. This research discovered gaps between what parents say and what professionals believe parents say. Parents said that education was a very high concern to them, but this message did not get through to professionals. The key is for professionals and parents to recognize that they share a commitment to children's education. SDE has developed a pamphlet for parents and training for messengers to open this conversation.

Mary Grace Reed said that policymakers are well-intentioned but have become busier in recent years, and this has resulted in a disconnect between policymakers' work and constituencies who often have little understanding of specific legislation and other proposals. Therefore, policymakers and parents need to make connections with one another to strengthen public policy for children.

Closing

Ms. Busch closed the meeting at 12:14 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Yrchik". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

John Yrchik
Secretary